

# Contemporary Issues in Juvenile Justice

---

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 3

---

2015

## Six Northeast Los Angeles Residents Indicate Reasons Local Youth Join Gangs and Offer Suggestions for Lowering Violence

Fernando Parra

Frank Malgesini

Emma Escobedo

Anna C. Ballesteros

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pvamu.edu/cojpp-contemporaryissues>



Part of the [Child Psychology Commons](#), [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#), [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Parra, Fernando; Malgesini, Frank; Escobedo, Emma; and Ballesteros, Anna C. (2015) "Six Northeast Los Angeles Residents Indicate Reasons Local Youth Join Gangs and Offer Suggestions for Lowering Violence," *Contemporary Issues in Juvenile Justice*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pvamu.edu/cojpp-contemporaryissues/vol9/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @PVAMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Issues in Juvenile Justice by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @PVAMU. For more information, please contact [hvkoshy@pvamu.edu](mailto:hvkoshy@pvamu.edu).

## Six Northeast Los Angeles Residents Indicate Reasons Local Youth Join Gangs and Offer Suggestions for Lowering Violence

Fernando Parra  
California State University Pomona

Frank Malgesini, Emma Escobedo, Anna Cecilia Villarreal Ballesteros  
La Universidad Autonoma de Chihuahua in Chihuahua, Chih., Mexico

Six long-time Los Angeles residents in a community with feuding Chicano gangs provide reasons local youth join gangs. Provided reasons correlate with their suggested interventions and meeting with community stakeholders and gang member to address gang violence and its resolution. The rationale for evaluating long-time residents is that police and newspaper reports, and even gang members themselves may provide biased views on the topic. These long-time residents are in a position to provide credible reasons for why the youth in their community join the local gangs that if taken seriously should provide a realistic basis for positive change. The respondents have all named the gangs active in their community. Some of the gangs are historical and well-established and have longevity in the community: Big Hazard, Eastside Clover, Avenues, among others, were around when the respondents were in their youth and before. Other gangs, Eastlake, Lincoln Heights, and Parkside among them, are relatively recent but still have over 25 years in the community and are becoming well-established.

*Keywords:* youth, join gangs, Los Angeles

Gang violence and other direct murders of youth by other youth (especially drive-by, and now walk-up shootings) have been a concern in the United States for well over four decades. This is especially true in the African American and Latino communities of the inner cities. Lincoln Heights in Northeast Los Angeles, although getting better; no major shootings in the last 6 months of 2014 and early 2015. Many describe the area as a war zone. The Chicano gangs have been feuding for over 4 decades, costing numerous lives, as well as injuries, and the prison life-time incarceration of many young men.

Five of our six respondents have lived for most of their lives at the epicenter of gang violence that has been, until recently, taking place on a regular basis and for many years. One continued teaching at the local high school until her recent retirement and remains very active politically in the community. She grew up in the area and knows it well. There were two decades that particularly experienced an increase in the use of firearms. This was 1980s and 1990s and on into the new century. Although gang conflict in the 1960s involved an occasional gun, from the 1980s until recently gunfire was heard regularly in the community. Shootings were the norm. Interestingly, during the mid-1990s, walk-up shootings seemed to have replaced the drive-by shootings.

The residents we have interviewed have been affected personally by the violence and have not wavered in their desire to see an end to the senseless violence. That these long-time residents have not abandoned their community speaks well for their love of their community. Their morale solidarity is palpable. Over the years all have attended, at one time or another, community meetings, called by the district city councilman, addressing issues of gang violence. The sounds of gunfire, police helicopters, and ambulance sirens are constant reminders of the problem. The streets in the evening are isolated with all the businesses closed and boarded up. Night life for

families is nonexistent in Lincoln Heights. Except for a few bars and all the businesses quickly close up when evening arrives covering their windows with siding. The streets are not safe especially for teenagers. Over the last 40 years, there has been at least one person shot and often killed on every half-block of the main streets of the community. Most community members know personally someone killed or badly hurt as a result of gang violence. In trying to understand why youngsters join gangs we have sought to interview five long-time residents with a history in the community. We did not seek the police or newspaper accounts, or gang members' explanations for the reasons elaborated upon by Moore (1993) who suggests that the police may frame their insights in a criminal perspective that is obviously of interest to them; and the newspapers are often interested in sensationalizing gangs to sell their paper. The gang members themselves may not offer unbiased perspectives either since they may have an interest in shaping their responses to those of the interviewer, especially if they think they have something to gain from the interviewer.

The six key Chicano respondents are designated in this study by their occupations: Detention Service Officer, Librarian, Teacher, Security Guard, Vehicle Repair worker. They were specifically selected for their long-time residence, experience; sophistication and knowledge of the community to provide their views on why youth have been joining the local warring gangs for over four decades. The majority of respondent's "greatly favor" with a few noting that they "somewhat favor" that business leaders, police, social workers, and other stakeholders along with residents and gangs should come together at community meetings. This choice correlates with the question: "What can help change the situation for the better?"

The extensive everyday experience in the community of these five respondents allowed them to develop the understanding of the causes and the situated intimacy with the effects of gang membership that form the rationale for the study. "The shootings

people see on television we see from our front yard,” states the Detention Service Officer, who along with neighbors has witnessed shootings directly in front of him in the early afternoon and during the week to say nothing of the weekend when gunfire is usually intense. The Librarian for years regularly repainted the front wall of his home quietly removing gang graffiti that the local gang continually redecorated. Along with others he has endured the fear frequent gunfire brings to people in the community and has responded along with the other residents by attending community meetings whose attendees often sought police solutions. Over the years residents like these respondents have gained a sophistication that allows them to understand the confusion behind the often naive suggestions proposed not only by some of the residents, but also by some of the police and city council field deputies and the city councilperson himself. On occasion, city officials and their representatives from the District Attorney’s office, the LAPD and other institutions are apt to unintentionally mislead the community regarding the realistic effectiveness of their offices in dealing with gang members. For example, it is not automatic that an arrest and subsequent testifying against a person insures her incarceration. Rather, it could just as well have an adverse effect on the witness; and the community members know this. Suggestions such as these could endanger the witness, as the alleged perpetrator does not necessarily stay locked up, if arrested. The alleged perpetrator may obtain bail or his lawyer may gain his release on a technicality. The residents know all this and the officer giving such advice may appear naive with such suggestions.

Longevity in the community should yield unique insights regarding the problem with gang youth. Often research is inaccurate or biased since findings are only as good as the data collected and even accurate data requires interpretation by persons deeply involved in the daily life of the community. The respondents in this study are long-time residents with no self-interest in providing a slanted or self-serving view of the topic. They are beyond believing change will occur from the top down. They have learned to cope with the gang crisis often by addressing the problem themselves; and, yes often by calling the police, only to get a busy signal, or getting a late response from the police and little if any understanding from the city council and relevant public institutions. This has been the situation over the years. They have dealt with the problem themselves and their insights if taken seriously may provide a basis for change, if not in the immediate future perhaps over the long term. They suspect that if the violence occurring in this area were to happen on the Westside, the response from police (often disrespect and poor insight) and other agencies (city council catering to business rather public interests) would never be tolerated.

### Theoretical Framework

Vigil’s Multiple (1993, 2002) Marginality Theory posits the view that Chicano youth are marginalized in multiple areas. Those youth that are “regular” members, which are the ones generally responsible for most problems have usually lived much more problematical lives from those youth that are only “transitional” gang members. According to Vigil (1993):

Multiple marginality refers to being outside the mainstream of Anglo-American society and its access to wealth and power in such a way that the following differences become evident: ecological: visual/spatial distinctions; economic: underclass, secondary labor market; social: family strain, school failure; cultural: nested subcultures, syncretic cholo; and psychological: adolescent status crisis, group identity. (p. 99)

Vigil (2002) believes that the police, schools, and the family are the major institutions in an adolescents’ life and that they need to address the gang situation.

### Respondent Profiles

Six key respondents were queried. At the time of the study, the respondents were one 55 year-old high school woman teacher-counselor at Abraham Lincoln High School, a 56 year-old woman bank secretary, a 57 year-old male librarian (now retired) for the *Los Angeles Times*, a 45 year-old male Detention Service Officer at Central Juvenile Hall, a retired 65 year-old male security guard, and a retired 78 year-old male vehicle body worker. The librarian and bank secretary are married to each other but both have lived in Lincoln Heights all their lives. All are Mexican American. Two of the respondents are women. All were born in the United States. Parents of two of the respondents were born in Mexico. Four of the respondents are Democrats. Two lean toward the Democrats but chose neither party in the questionnaire. All are Catholic; four respondents attend church once a week and the other two once every six months or less. The men are all veterans with honorable discharges. The Vehicle Repair Worker served in combat during World War II. As of this report all, but one, still reside in Lincoln Heights. None of the respondents has a police record. All of them are eligible to vote.

### Locus

Lincoln Heights is located in Northeast Los Angeles under the jurisdiction of the Hollenbeck Division of the Los Angeles Police Department. It is home to several active gangs. Among what Vigil (1993) calls the established gangs are Happy Valley, Hazard, East-Side Clover, Dog Town, Rose Hill. The Avenues are nearby but under the Northeast police jurisdiction. They, however, come in contact with the other gangs by attending Lincoln High School. The Avenues have feuded with Happy Valley over time, for example. Besides these historical and traditional gangs of the community are others that are more recent (25 years or less in existence); the Eastlake gang, the Lincoln Heights gang, Parkside, Thomas Street, Alta Street gang, and a section of the 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang which has existed outside of Lincoln Heights much longer. Its origins are in South (Central) Los Angeles, near the USC campus. Los Angeles has been described by Sheldon, Tracy & Brown (2004), as a city having a chronic gang problem. There was a time established gangs existed only on the periphery of Lincoln Heights. The middle of the community described as “no mans (sic) land.” About 25 years ago, the more recent gangs came into existence. It needs to be noted that although we refer to each gang as one, there are multiple gangs within each named one, for example the Happy Valley gang has multiple gangs within the geographical area so named. That is to say that multiple cliques are usually part of the larger *varrio* (neighborhood). In the case of Happy Valley the cliques are age-graded.

The respondents have seen the transitions of the community from a largely Italian neighborhood, to Mexican American, to today—largely Latino migrant of which a majority is Mexican, with a substantial Asian, (largely Vietnamese and Chinese) influx. According to the Los Angeles Almanac & U.S. Census Bureau (City of Los Angeles Population by Community & Race 2000 Census) the total population of Lincoln Heights is 29,129. Of this, 29 percent (8,484) are white alone, 24 percent (6,913) are Asian, and 72 percent (20,897) are Hispanic. African Americans are few at 0.88 percent (255). The median household income in 1999 was \$23, 591. The established gangs were around when the respondents were young. In the 1960s some gangs would have been closer to the community, meaning they would have had positive relationships with the adults. One resident (not of this sample) remembering the Happy Valley Midgets stated, “You guys were noble.” That gang had stable family households with family earners, despite being lower working class. The parents were not older gang members, and none of the families from which this gang’s members came lived in the housing projects. They would all have been described as decent families as opposed to street families in Anderson’s (1999) typology.

### Methods

Of thirty-six respondents interviewed by the principle author, six respondents personally acquainted to the first author for as long as they have lived in the community were selected for in-depth interviews. Their longevity in the area, centrality of their position (where their homes are located), experience and perceptiveness of the gang problem were the principle reasons for their selection. The central questions of the study are:

1. How is the gang defined?
2. What interventions do they favor to combat gang violence?
3. Are respondents willing to have a community meeting wherein the police, community leaders, business leaders, residents, and most important, known gang members are present to consider the problems facing their community?

This third question came from Weston’s (1993) study in Las Vegas Nevada. Buttressing the interviews was a standard interview guide with other questions not treated in this paper, but will be elaborated in future papers. The respondents have remained available for elaboration and have continued to provide input regarding the gang problem in the community.

In this study we are especially interested in their suggestions for interventions in addressing gang violence. Three respondents filled out the questionnaire themselves and two were interviewed face to face by the first author who recorded the responses on the research instrument.

### Results

The first question posed: Why do you believe young people join gangs in your neighborhood? This question elicited the following responses identified by respondent’s occupation: High School teacher and counselor: “Many factors: [lack of] parental supervision, programs, reading below grade level, self-esteem-peer pressure.”

Bank secretary: “Not many activities for the young; not enough supervision. Unfortunately, the members get their ‘family’ unity from the gang.”

Detention Officer: “Lack of opportunity in jobs.”

Librarian: “Hopelessness, a need to belong, peer pressure, broken families, dysfunctionality within the home, history of gang affiliation within the family.”

Security guard: “No discipline; like in the old days when parents spanked. In school, they’ve done away with paddling. Teachers have no power.”

Vehicle repair worker: “Make a name for themselves; prove to people they are somebody; family irresponsible; family members, gang members too.”

The specific results in this section showed a direct correlation of responses with selected area of intervention: family history of gang membership, broken and dysfunctional families, lack of family supervision (family intervention), poor reading levels, lack of self-discipline, and high drop-out rates (educational), lack of self-worth, peer pressure (psychological), lack of jobs, and opportunity (economic), and alienation-wanting to make a name for themselves, sense of hopelessness, need to belong (social).

All of the respondents agreed to a community meeting that include all the stakeholders, mentioned *supra*, in the community including the gang members.

### Discussion

Vigil’s (1993, 2002) multiple marginality elements appear to be implied in all of the responses of the respondents. An “opportunities” model which has been found to work the best when working in cities like Los Angeles (Shelden et al., 2004) provides the type of interventions suggested by our respondents. Homeboy Industries which falls within this model has been successful in providing services to hard-core gang members. Father Gregory Boyle S.J. has concentrated on employment as most important element with legal, psychological, educational, and other services. In January of 2007 Homeboy Industries relocated to China Town near Lincoln Heights and continues to today in 2015 to provide services. For L.A. County, success rate in recidivism is 20 percent. Homeboy success is 70 percent. As Shelden et al (2004) have determined: the least successful model is police suppression, a model often applied in the recent past in Los Angeles. Having Homeboy Industries nearby is a positive turn for the better for Lincoln Heights.

Significantly, resident responses correlate with the question of whether they would “favor having a community meeting bringing together community educators, business and political leaders, social workers, the police, and gang members.” The responses appear to suggest reasons for joining gangs can be changed by the will to change the basis of why youth join gangs. Those having a stake in the safety, prosperity, and future of the Lincoln Heights community coming together and meeting together to discuss the issues directly can certainly be the start in effecting positive social change. A noteworthy precedent of all stakeholders, that includes gang members, is available from Nevada (Weston, 1993) wherein, when all the stakeholders came together to address the issue of gang violence, the result was a lowering of gang violence, despite an increase in gang

membership. Still, everyone was happy as a result of the lowering of violence which was everyone's main concern as it is in Northeast Los Angeles.

Understanding that key and respectable people from the community are willing to include members from across the community should give the official leadership such as the Los Angeles City Council's office notice regarding an effective and realistic method to curb violence in this community. More police on the street does not necessarily decrease crime, but involvement by various sectors of the community along with the police can make a difference as evidenced by the Weston (1993) study, and the success at Homeboy Industries, as well as the willingness of the Lincoln Heights community might just do the job. These respondents, who are credible witnesses to the history of gangs, their activities, and police response, in their community offer realistic insights for achievable goals of greatly decreasing violent gang activity.

Moore (1993) and Monti (1993) has suggested gang research is often compromised by the researchers themselves when they rely on police or newspaper accounts of gang issues, problems, and definitions, and even when they rely on the gang members themselves who may have the self-interest of appearing favorable to the researcher in the telling of their story. These community respondents, on the other hand, only have the self-interest of alleviating some if not all of the violence in their community. They have been around a long time and the city leadership ought to listen. When they suggest gang member participate in community meetings they will be there to remind the gang members of their behavior and their expectations of them, while the gang members can express their concerns in the community. Both can agree to help end the violence by

dialogue. It is worth noting that it is not the number of respondents, but the insights and knowledge based on the experience provided by longevity in the community that provides the prescience for greatly decreasing if not eliminating gang violence.

### References

- Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the streets: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city* NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Los Angeles Almanac & U.S. Census Bureau. *City of Los Angeles Population by Community & Race 2000 Census*.
- Monti, D.J. (1993). Origins and problems of gang research in the United States, Cummings S. & Monti, D. J. (1993). *Gangs: the origins and impact of contemporary youth gangs in the United States*. N.Y.: SUNY.
- Moore, J. (1993). Gangs, drugs, and violence, in Cummings S. & Monti, D. J. (1993). *Gangs the origins and impact of contemporary youth gangs in the United States*. N.Y.: SUNY.
- Shelden, R.G., Tracy, S.K., & Brown, W.B. (2004). *Youth Gangs in American Society*. CA: Wadsworth.
- Vigil, D. (1993). The established gang, in Cummings S. & Monti, D. J. (1993). *Gangs: the origins and impact of contemporary youth gangs in the United States*. N.Y.: SUNY.
- Vigil, J. D. (2002). *A rainbow of gangs: Street cultures in the mega-city*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Weston, J. (1993). Community policing: An Approach to youth gangs in a medium-sized city. In Miller, J., Cheryl L. M., & Malcolm W. K. 2001. *Youth gangs in American society*. CA: Roxbury.